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SUBJECT: Central Committee on minorities, religious, land

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11. (SBU) Summary. The second session of the 7th plenum of the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) 9th Central Committee (CC) apparently focused on key human rights issues of national solidarity, treatment of ethnic minorities, implementation of religious policy, and land use. The CC as well as CPV General Secretary Nong Duc Manh explicitly admitted failures in implementation of official policies and incompetent or ill-trained cadres, especially at the grassroots level and notably in mountainous areas. The plenum's solutions for these problems appear mainly to include strengthening CPV and State control and institutions, with an emphasis on heightening "patriotic" activities and guarding against "enemy" plots. Unfortunately, the CPV's new efforts may exacerbate rather than alleviate long-standing problems, and non-recognized religious activities and activists may face even tougher treatment and scrutiny. End Summary.

12. (U) During an unusual "second phase" meeting of the 9th CC 7th plenum January 13-21, the main themes included strengthening national solidarity, improving work related to ethnic minorities, handling religious affairs better, and dealing more successfully with land issues, according to media reports (ref a). (Note: Embassy requested a post-plenum read-out from the CPV on January 15, but is unlikely to get an appointment until after the Tet holidays. Nodel Pitts is scheduled to meet with the Government Committee on Religious Affairs on January 24 and may learn more about any updated religious policy; Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan reportedly briefed the CRA about the CC's resolution on religion on January 21, which the press described as the CPV's "first-ever." Embassy has also requested a meeting with the CRA to discuss its January 22-23 national conference covering its work in 2002/2003. End note)

13. (U) In concluding remarks, CPV GS Manh admitted serious problems, including discrimination, lack of mutual trust, and the low quality of cadres. The Plenum's communique spoke at even greater length about such issues, noting that "in some places" -- especially minority and mountainous areas -- cadres and party members lacked "solidarity" and, in some cases, "took advantage of their positions or were corrupt" in the management and use of land. Manh warned that the twin issues of minorities and religion were "strategic" and that it was time to "pay attention with all our efforts" to these issues.

14. (U) While reaffirming the right of religious belief or non-belief, both Manh and the communique emphasized "legal activities" and denounced use of "ethnic nationality, belief [or] religion" for "illegal activities" aimed at "dividing the people" or hurting "national security." The communique noted that "in some places, especially in areas of ethnic minorities, some believers had used religious belief to conduct activities of opposition." The communique called for the development of a "spirit of patriotism" among religious believers to "defeat the plots of enemy forces using religion and ethnic nationality to destroy solidarity or oppose the system." "Foreign relations" related to religion should be "coordinated with the foreign policy of the Party and State."

15. (U) The plenum's solution for ethnic minority problems included "improving the quality of the political system" at the grassroots level and ensuring that "hot spots" did not emerge in minority and mountainous areas, as well as increased and improved use of radio and television programs.

16. (U) Manh noted that the plenum's deliberations on land policy and use will be an "important base" when the National Assembly looks at a new Law on Land sometime in 2003. The plenum admitted that land issues were "very complicated" in some places, often for historical reasons, and called for "strengthening the leadership of the Party" and promoting the role of the CPV and Vietnam Fatherland Front to bring order to the land problem, along with clarifications regarding the "responsibilities . . . and management of the State" regarding land.

17. (U) The plenum agreed to remove Minister of Public Security Le Hong Anh as head of the CC's Inspection Commission, to be replaced by CC member and chairman of the CC's Commission for Internal Security Nguyen Van Chi, who simultaneously entered the CC's Secretariat. (Note: this probably was not indicative of any censure against Anh, who retains his Politburo seat. This re-allocation allows him to concentrate on the MPS portfolio he assumed last summer. End note) In a probable indication of the severity of upcoming "Nam Cam mafia" case, the plenum formally "disciplined" Politburo member (and chief of the CC's Economic Commission) Truong Tan Sang for "failing to meet his responsibilities in investigating and preventing the criminal activities of Truong Van Cam," as well as problems in "work with cadres," while serving as Ho Chi Minh City Party secretary. Sang apparently did not lose either his Politburo seat or his committee chairmanship, however.

18. (SBU) Comment: Embassy will continue to press for a fuller read-out in the weeks ahead regarding what must have been lively discussions among CC members on these admittedly sensitive and often inter-related issues. The CC's focus was, at least, squarely on some of the key human rights challenges facing the CPV and GVN nowadays, notably in the Central Highlands but also in other areas. Calls to improve the quality and education of cadres at the grassroots levels are welcome, if not new. However, the bottom-line CPV determination, in line with earlier plenum resolutions on strengthening party leadership at all levels under the rubric of "grassroots democracy," likely is to continue to reassert greater CPV control and oversight. At the same time, the CPV explicitly encouraged well-meaning (if not always well implemented) programs to reduce poverty, improve educational opportunities, promote economic development, and accept religious activities by recognized religious groups. The sharp references to "enemy forces" using religion and ethnic nationality for nefarious purposes is a distinct reminder that the CPV and GVN likely have diminishing patience toward activities by locals or foreigners that even hint at separatism or promotion of non-recognized religious groupings, however. House churches, evangelists, and Dega nationalists may face even more vigilant scrutiny and perhaps harsher treatment by local CPV and GVN authorities in the wake of this plenum. Embassy and ConGen will watch for any indications of any such campaign, which could easily exacerbate instead of alleviate tensions in minority areas. PORTER